



Tourism and ICT - the Hidden Opportunities

By Atiba Phillips, Principal Consultant, INFOCOMM Technologies Ltd.

In many of the smaller tourism-focused islands of the Region, during the peak tourist season, the number of tourists on the island rivals the size of the citizen population. The total contribution of travel and tourism to the 2012 Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the Caribbean was 14 percent, the highest for any region in the world (WTTC 2013). Tourism's contribution to GDP in 2012 was 27.1 percent in the British Virgin Islands, 22.9 percent in Anguilla and 22 percent in the Bahamas – an indication of the important role of the sector in the Region's economies.

When one considers that, at its essence, what the tourism industry is attempting to do is attract the spend of geographically removed persons to non-domestic locales, luring them based upon information that they receive prior to making the journey, the value of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) begins to become evident. Indeed ICTs are pervasive throughout the travel and tourism space, as all stakeholders, destinations, hotels, airlines and visitors, send their information ahead of them so as to optimize efficiency, facilitate value creation and enhance the transaction experience on all sides.

The Experience Economy

The experience economy is a term that is used in the IT industry to describe the premium that consumers pay for a positive or differentiated user experience. User experience is the reason why Apple Computers Inc. (with its iPad, iPod, iPhone, etc.) is one of the most profitable companies in the world; as the experience of using their devices is seen to be superior to that of their competitors.

The concept can be readily applied to the tourism sector. Indeed it is the experience, (and the expectation of that experience, based

on the information available) that travelers pay a premium for, and get excited about even before they arrive.

In this regard, ICTs are used to exchange advance information among potential market actors so as to encourage eventual economic / financial exchanges. Destinations will send information on heritage sites, upcoming festivals, events, cuisine options and fun water sport activities available. Hotels will send information with respect to package deals and specials. Travelers will send to their airline, preferred seating and travel dates. All of this information exchange happening prior to the purchase of a ticket (the financial exchange).

As competition among destinations increases and the complexity and sophistication of the industry advances, ICTs will play a more and more important role. In many cases, the presence or absence of connectivity / ICT services itself is becoming a "make or break" decision-point in the tourist purchase decision. For e.g. internet access in hotels, the ease of accessing seamless cellular service, and the ability to check e-mail at an airport or coffee shop, are key differentiators in the minds of a growing number of travelers.

Now available are mobile apps which help the user identify the nearest type of restaurant or site of interest, some offering directions, bookings, ticketing and ratings, in an interactive format conveniently packaged on the user's personal device. All of these ICT based applications support tourism activity by enhancing the tourism experience and assisting to delight the customer.

The Road Less Travelled

While these are areas which are well studied and in which there are vibrant business/

commercial offerings available, there are other areas which though less visible, present great opportunity to the Caribbean to increase the value derived from the tourism sector as well as to reduce the risks associated with regard to ensuring on-going sustainability of the industry.

Tourism and the Food Value Chain

What linkages are there between the tourism sector and the agriculture sector on our islands i.e. "Agri-tourism"? For e.g. a chat with the General Manager of Divi Southwinds Hotel Barbados revealed that many tourists anticipate in their minds the bounty of the fruit harvest of the Caribbean but are disappointed at the quality and variety of local fruits that they are able to access when they stay at Regional hotels.

Mechanisms to ensure that information on demand (both actual and potential) for regional agricultural produce from the tourism sector is channeled to domestic agricultural producers for action, is critical. Customers such as boutique hotels, hotel chains, the cruise ship industry, and restaurants present an enormous opportunity for Caribbean farmers as an outlet for "export" of their produce, though sold within local shores. This is a high value and sustainable demand market which currently is under-engaged and can be greatly facilitated by the enlightened application of ICTs.

Mitigating against Disasters

Disasters are occurrences which have the possibility of reversing hard gained development advances and threaten the reputation of organizations or livelihoods of people/nations. Natural disasters esp. in the Caribbean are simply a fact of life as the Region is among the world's most vulnerable



in the world. The data also suggests that the impact of these disasters on the tourism sector can be critical. For e.g. it is estimated that of approximately 420 places of accommodation on the island of Barbados in 2007, 90% were sited on the coastline (ECLAC 2007: 29). As such, the need to put in place measures to reduce the vulnerability and impact of these hazards on Tourism is most critical in this sub-region.

The Disaster Risk Management (DRM) function throughout the world relies heavily on information collection, storage, processing, visualization and dissemination in order to:

- quickly and accurately determine (e.g. weather) patterns which may indicate the onset of an impending disaster
- disseminate early warning information to vulnerable populations (inclusive of

tourists) along with guidelines for best response

- gather, visualise and process information to inform (tourist) development zoning, building codes as well as planning guidelines to enable the “build back better” principle

Travelers may be more confident to visit certain destinations over others based on the destinations innate ICT capability. In the untimely circumstance that their stay coincides with a disaster event, they are much more likely to survive and be in continuous communication with both family abroad as well as local officials in destinations in which ICTs such as remote sensing, GIS, satellite phone, hazard mapping, robust Broadband Internet and mobile phone services are in place.

The very survival of the on-island tourist industry itself may be impacted with respect to how countries deal with the routing and presentation of information regarding not only their response, but also with regard to the measures which are taken to harden (communication) infrastructure and disseminate relevant information prior to events.

When assessing and planning for tourism in the Region, is the application of ICTs (in these contexts) taken in to consideration as key factors? Cross pollination between ICT for Development experts as well as sector-based participants is critical. This will ensure that the industry achieves a superior tourist experience and optimal domestic capture of value-added, while at the same time protecting the future of this vibrant Regional industry.

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Remember to always -

- Plan your day before leaving home
- Wear your seatbelt, front and back
- Secure children 13yrs and under in the back seat
- Designate a sober driver
- Stay focused and drive defensively
- Stay off the phone
- Regularly check and maintain your vehicle



ARRIVE ALIVE

675-LIVE (5483)

contact@arrivealive.com

www.arrivealivett.com

Look for us on

